

Betrayal By Knight

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Alex cried out as the excruciating pain shot across her arm and shoulder. She felt the scorched fabric beneath her fingertips and, staring at her jacket, she saw the jagged slash that cut through to her skin. Sweat pouring from her face, Alex looked up at the imposing figure standing at the top of the hill.

"Who are you?"

Maniacal laughter echoed against the impenetrable darkness of the mountainside.

"Why are you doing this?" Alex screamed.

"Miss Winger?"

A gruff, filtered voice jolted Alex Winger from her day-dream. Heart pounding, she wiped the cool sweat from her forehead and pushed a loose strand of hair from her eyes.

"Miss Winger. You can pass now."

Alex stared up into the face of an Imperial stormtrooper. Beneath her, she felt the gentle vibrations of her landspeeder's repulsorlift engines as they idled silently at the security checkpoint. "Sorry," she said, taking back her ID. As the stormtrooper waved her through, the nightmarish vision remained an intrusion on her senses.

Closing her eyes, she drew in a deep breath, then released it.

Calm down, she told herself. Brief glimpses of the peculiar scene replayed themselves in her mind. They were vivid, poignant images accompanied by feelings of dread and helplessness.

As in the vision, pain swept through her body. Alex could hear the muffled pulse of the lightsaber as it grazed her skin. Her hands tightened on the steering column. White-knuckled and trembling, she felt another presence reaching out to her from that dark apparition. Someone she cared for cried out in agony.

Gunning the landspeeder's engines, Alex struggled to shake the haunting apparition. Blaster fire echoed in the distance; and from the corner of her eye, she caught the movements of armed troops on the rooftops of the buildings that lined Ariana's main avenue. Since word of an impending New Republic invasion had filtered through the capital city, the situation on Garos IV had changed drastically in the last few days. Traffic jammed the streets -- empty cargo skiffs headed north into the city, while scout troopers escorted skiffs, crammed with equipment and Imperial officers, south toward the spaceport.

Alex ignored the chaotic scenes, her mind searching the vision for clues. Rising from her memory, the apparition materialized in her mind. He was a faceless renegade consumed by dark shadows that threatened to engulf her. At his feet, on the windswept hillside, Alex could see a body. And beyond them, there was a tremendous thundering that shook the ground. What could it mean?

Alex tightly grasped the controls of the speeder and stopped it across from Imperial Headquarters. She studied the old granitite building. Its flying arches and graceful lines were a tribute to Garosian ingenuity. Gray pillars lined the front entrances. Nearly four stories tall, the imposing, immobile stone sentinels held the weight of the structure and the ideals of the men and women who worked inside. Her eyes finally came to rest on the fourth-floor corner office -- Imperial Governor Tork Winger's suite.

She took a deep breath, staring at the movement of shadows in the glass of her father's private office. She thought about the gentle man who had adopted her when she was six. Though she loved him dearly, explaining her intentions to remain in Ariana was not something she looked forward to. Alex had run through the conversation a dozen times in her head, but the outcome was uncertain.

Winger did not know about her activities with the resistance movement on Garos or her more recent involvement with the New Republic. How could she tell him the truth -- that his daughter was a traitor to the



Empire he served? It would be only a matter of time before word filtered out about the players involved in the movement to free Garos from Imperial authority. And the name Alexandra Winger would be near the top of that list.

Alex bowed her head, willing her heart to slow its frantic pace. Smoothing the neckline of her sapphire gown, she stepped away from the speeder and closed the door. The heavy train pulled at her back and shoulders, but she shrugged at the slight weight and started up the corridor.

The florescent lighting grids inside were a welcomed blessing. Within the warm glow, there were no shadows to taunt her or to cry out in agony. By force of habit, Alex moved through the vacant mezzanine to the lift platform. Arriving at the restricted level of her father's suite, she stepped down from the platform. The stormtroopers at the end of the passage hardly acknowledged her arrival, recognizing her from frequent visits to her father's office. As she reached for the door, she noticed it was slightly ajar; and the sounds of voices escaped to her ears.

"Is it true he's a Jedi Knight?" Lieutenant Dair Haslip asked.

Alex recognized the Imperial officer's voice and paused nervously, waiting -- as he did -- for an answer. Unconsciously, she ran her hand back and forth across her arm where the lightsaber in her vision had slashed her.

"Indeed he is," Winger replied, "which is precisely why he was sent to conduct the evacuation. His training was overseen by the Emperor at one point, I believe. Before all that," Alex heard her father cough abruptly, clearing his throat, "before all that nasty business with the Rebel Alliance at Endor. His being an actor is a boon really. I thought an impromptu performance might raise some spirits. He thoroughly agreed."

"Isn't there someone more trustworthy than Brandl who could accomplish this?"

"None so close. Don't forget, Lord Brandl was obviously able to please the Emperor -- if he hadn't, he wouldn't be alive." <PBrandl. It was a name from the past that made Alex's blood run cold. It was the name of a dark Jedi, who by order of the Emperor, carried out the mission that resulted in the destruction of her homeworld and the deaths of her grandparents fifteen years ago. In hearing the name, her senses filled with vivid details of the Imperial ships and troops that led the destruction. Her body ached from intense memories of the hot, blast-scored rubble and transparisteel that nearly entombed her. Jaalib Brandl. Could this be the same man?

Alex peered into her father's office, slowly pressing the door open. Tork Winger stood by the window, hands clasped behind his back, staring outside into the darkening skies. "Are you sure you won't join us, Lieutenant? Alexandra will be so disappointed."

"I'll make it up to her and you, sir," Dair Haslip replied. "I've never been much of a theater-goer. I'll leave Lord Brandl and his entourage to you."

"Lord Brandl?" Alex questioned, masking her dread behind a smile.

"Good evening, Alex," Dair said.

"Who's this Brandl?" she repeated, as she moved across the room to join her father by the window.

"An actor," Dair said with biting sarcasm.

Alex looked up sharply and met his intent eyes. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she read the concern in his face and acknowledged it with a subtle nod.

"He's not just an actor, Alexandra. Jaalib Brandl is the gentleman charged with overseeing the orderly evacuation of Ariana." Glaring adamantly at Dair, Winger soothed the harsh glance with a smile. "And his credentials are impeccable... both in commanding troops and commanding an audience." He gently took her hand and squeezed it, kissing her knuckles. "You look lovely this evening, Alexandra."

"Thank you." Alex blushed, her cheeks warming with the compliment. "But I really don't understand this, Father. It seems absurd to be attending this performance when we're about to be invaded by the New Republic."

"Lord Brandl has everything in control, Alexandra. Besides, this dramatic presentation may help soothe the nerves of our comrades." Winger glanced over his shoulder and back outside at the activity in the streets. "Good for morale, you know."

Alex looked toward Dair, catching the expression of disgust that crossed his face. Like her, he had nothing but contempt for the Galactic Empire and its authority. The uniform he wore was strictly a cover. It allowed him to infiltrate the Imperial military command on Garos for the purpose of undermining and dismantling it.

"Dair, are you sure you won't keep us company?" Winger pleaded.

"Sorry, Governor Winger." Dair stared down at Alex and shrugged. "I promised some friends I'd meet them at Chado's Pub. This evacuation is scattering us to different posts, so we wanted to get together for a good-bye drink."

"Then we shall leave you to it, Lieutenant. Come along, my dear. I see our escort has arrived." Winger offered Alex his arm as the intercom buzzed to signal the arrival. The governor nodded to Dair. "Tell them we're on our way downstairs."

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A fine mist descended from the ceiling tiles above the stage of the Tihaz Theatre as a low fog drifted in from the curtain wings. The deceptive rhythm of spring rain echoed from the inner recesses and rooftop of the elaborate set of a nobleman's cottage. It was night time in the drama; and in the background, the nocturnal cries of a wounded animal sounded in the distance. The agonizing cry was the director's subtle cue.

Sitting on a stool at the edge of an antiquated game table, the actor exploded into a blur of motion. In a rage, he swept his arms over the Jj'abot table, knocking all but three pawns to the stage floor. Alex stifled a gasp, bracing herself against a reaction as the congregation about her lurched and bulked in their seats. There was a powerful disturbance in the Force as Jaalib Brandl used it to manipulate his mesmerized audience.

Alex saw it as a malignant conjuration of his talents and ability. She took a deep breath. A knot formed in the pit of her stomach at the outpouring of darkness emanating from the stage presence. She swallowed pensively as she glanced into the faces around her. Her father's subordinates and peers were aglow in the strength of the performance, smiling and attentive to the unfolding drama.

Alex resented their insensitivity. Annoyed by it, she concentrated on the dark, brooding figure sitting just beyond the shadows of the prop front. Dressed in a full-length black robe, Brandl's erect body had the arrogant air of inherent aristocracy. Although his long, black hair was swept to the sides, away from his face, the faded stage lighting made it difficult to estimate his age. Was he the man who had led the Imperials to her homeworld? She could not be certain.

As the noise of clattering game pieces faded, the door of the cottage opened and the female lead stood in the portal, bathed in a halo of background light. "Dear, gentle Dontavian," the actress whispered. Alex rolled her eyes, recognizing the over-rehearsed accent in her voice. "Won't you come in from the cold?"

"Would you have me forsake my grave?" Brandl replied.

"Forsake your grave, Dontavian?"

"Yes, forsake my grave, as I have forsaken my father and forsaken my king!" Brandl spoke in low, even tones that caused a chill to run the length of Alex's spine. There was a sinister undertone to it that had only been hinted at throughout the tragedy. Here in the final acts, the menace was all too real. Having betrayed the love of his father for his loyalty to the king and then in turn, betrayed his king for the love of his father, the warrior and knight Dontavian was alone to face the consequences of his dual betrayal.

"I am a man without country, without family, without allegiance. I am worse than any man dead in his grave." Brandl turned to regard his distraught co-star. "I could only wish for the peace of the grave. For I am nothing! Not a son, not a knight, nothing." He rose from the stool, snatching the sculpted image of a black knight from the Jj'abot board. Alex wondered at the use of the peculiar prop, its symbolic significance. A black knight for a dark Jedi, how appropriate.

"Dontavian!" The actress fell at his feet, grasping at his dark robes. "Dontavian, my husband, what will become of you?" she gasped, zealously overacting the part. She buried her face in the hem of his robes, pretending to weep at their plight. "Where will you go?"

"I shall become as the shadows," Brandl declared. He stared into the audience, as if attempting to meet each audience member's eyes. "And I shall go, where only the darkness reigns..."

On this final cue, the curtain fell across the stage. The hand-picked audience of Imperial officers and citizens applauded in earnest, commanding the performance. "Stunning, simply stunning!" one of the command officers

commented, rising from his seat to join the unanimous standing ovation. Begrudgingly, Alex rose from her seat and praised the performance with as much sincerity as she could muster, shielding her uncertainty beneath a thin smile.

"Who would have thought a Jedi capable of such a moving performance," her father said incredulously. Leaning against the back of his seat, he stared at the swaying curtains as Jaalib Brandl came through them to make his final bows. "I think it's about time we met this young man. Shall we, Alexandra?" He stood up, offering Alex his arm.

Alex was grateful for the weight of her gown as it slowed her eager reaction to meeting Lord Brandl face to face. Officers and prominent citizens parted before them, nodding respectfully as they passed between the rows. While her father escorted her down the narrow aisle between Garos's dignitaries, Alex fixed her eyes on the dark Jedi. Standing only half a meter from the crowd surrounding the ominous figure, she studied the cool depths of his blue eyes. Impossible, she thought, concentrating on the handsome face. He was only a few years older than she. He would have been a child at the time of her grandparents' murder.

An Imperial officer, a lieutenant, stood in Brandl's shadow scanning the crowd. Alex did not recognize the shock of white-blond hair or the unreadable expression of the stranger's face. His manner was one of complete calm, but vigilant, as if expecting some assault against the Jedi. He turned, as if sensing Alex's direct glare. Never taking his eyes from her, the officer tapped Brandl on the shoulder.

With a tangible intensity that moved in his gaze, Brandl turned to them. His eyes brightened immediately with recognition. "Governor Winger." He bowed with deference. "It is a great honor to meet you."

"I think the honor should be mine," Winger replied with sincerity, offering his hand to the Jedi in friendship. Turning to Alex, the governor pulled her close to him and held Alex with warm affection. "Lord Brandl, this is the brightest star in my skies. My daughter, Alexandra."

Several centimeters taller than Alex, Brandl stepped toward her, enveloping her in the length of his shadow. Alex fought against a sudden tremor that swept the length of her back as the nightmarish vision came, unbidden, to her memory. Brandl took her hand gently and bowed again, never taking his eyes from hers. "My pleasure, Miss Winger." Noting the graceful curves of her face and the almond shape of her eyes, bright, blue, passionate eyes, he smiled graciously. "A man could only be envious of such a resplendent star, Governor."

Winger's grin deepened with the compliment. "You come highly qualified, Lord Brandl. I'm eager to turn over the evacuation to your capable hands and your staff." The governor nodded to the officer at Brandl's side.

The Jedi rolled his eyes in despair. "Have I forgotten my manners? Speaking of qualified, this is Lieutenant Werth, Bane Werth, my assistant. He will be overseeing those areas that I cannot attend to personally."

"Governor," Werth whispered. "Miss Winger."

"You must be exhausted after such a stirring performance," Winger said as the crowd of Imperial notables gathered about them. "Allow me to offer my home as a sanctuary to you and your aide, Lord Brandl."

"Governor Winger, a word with you," an Imperial commander called from the back of the group. "That unfinished business with the resistance, Governor."

Alex watched her father's face darken with the mention of the resistance movement. "Alexandra." He turned to her, whispering, "Please take Lord Brandl and Lieutenant Werth back to the mansion for some well-deserved hospitality. I have some other business to see to. I'll join you shortly."

"Stay with the governor," Brandl instructed Werth. There was an urgency in his voice that would not be overruled. "I insist, Governor," he said before Winger could protest.

"It really is a good idea, father," Alex agreed, carefully watching the Jedi's reaction. "My landspeeder is just outside the Headquarters' building, Lord Brandl. Won't you follow me?"



Brandl grinned ominously. "A fleet of Star Destroyers couldn't hold me away." He offered his arm to her with an air of challenge.

Alex bit her tongue and accepted his arm. She led them from the theater, down the short walk, and to her landspeeder.

"Alex!"

Hearing her name, she turned toward the chaotic shadows just inside Chado's Pub. The Imperial tavern overflowed with uniformed and civilian patrons. Despite this, she instantly recognized Dair Haslip waving at her from the corner booth. She returned the wave, feeling Brandl's inquisitive eyes upon her.

Alex turned to open the landspeeder door. She paused, staring at Brandl, who was intently staring beyond her into the pub. "Chado's Pub," she offered. "It's a very popular place, as you can see. Even in the midst of our crisis."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Mine and my father's."

There was a peculiar ambiance about Brandl, as if he were ascertaining the truth in her words. Then without warning, he broke into a pleasant smile. "Shall we go?"

Alex glanced over her shoulder toward the pub, wondering what dark interest Brandl had taken in the establishment. Sitting down behind the steering bar, she started the speeder's engines and backtracked through Ariana, following the main road south to the governor's mansion, her home.

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An elaborate mosaic of stars was spread across the night skies above Garos IV. Too numerous to count, the vacillating lights created an inspiring backdrop for the twin moons hovering in elliptical orbit about the planet. As the intensity of moonlight fanned out across the countryside, a gentle breeze stirred the trees on the grounds of the governor's mansion. The celestial orbs illuminated the treacherous coastline below the estate and laid a trail of white light across the waters of the Locura Ocean.

Alex watched a flock of crupas as they flew from the rooftop, across the faces of Garos's twin moons, and into the night. Listening to the roar of the sea crashing against the cliffs, she closed her eyes and reveled in the serenity of her home.

"Thank you for the guided tour, Alexandra," Brandl said. He set his wine glass down on the aged stone patio railing. Leaning against the smooth surface, his eyes followed the moonlight down through the rocky Garosian hillside and into the shadows of the cliffs beyond. "Pity you have to leave all this."

Wondering if Brandl was taunting her, Alex straightened her shoulders and proudly raised her chin. "I do love this place." As she studied his features in the darkness, the apparition once again emerged from the depths of her mind. She forced herself to bury the visions deep within her subconscious. "Shall we walk down by the cliff's edge? The view from there is absolutely gorgeous."

"Aren't the paths treacherous at night?"

"Not with the moons shining so brightly. And not with an experienced guide to lead you." Alex grinned, carefully bundling the train of her gown under her arm.

Brandl was quick to help her fasten the lace bustle, freeing her legs to move over the uneven footing. "After you," he gallantly declared, allowing her to take the lead.

Skirting the rocky edges, Alex led the way down a well-worn path. She feigned a slip on the loose surface and felt Brandl's hands at her shoulders, steadyng her with practiced assurance. As he helped her down from the moss-covered rock, he said, "You never did tell me your thoughts on this evening's performance."

It was a fair question, Alex thought. "All right. Dontavian's father?"

Brandl turned to her, intrigued by the unspoken question. "What of him?"

"He was blind, wasn't he?"

"Indeed, he was."

"Then why did he and his servant disguise themselves as Tusken Raiders to avoid being captured. A blind Tusken? Isn't that a bit farcical?"

"I don't think you understand the symbolism behind--"

An animal howled mournfully in the distance, its cry echoing around the mountainside and between the close confines of the trees.

Brandl turned instinctively to the sound, fixing his gaze on the shadows moving beneath the forest canopy.
"What was that?"

"A wild boetay. They roam the countryside in small packs."

"Are they dangerous?"

"They can be quite vicious, especially if you disturb their young. But they tend to avoid contact with humans."

"Have you ever seen one?" Brandl rushed down the path ahead of her, intently searching the woods for some sign of the creature.

"Only from a distance," Alex replied, bewildered by his sudden excitement.

For a moment, Brandl seemed to become a small child, inquisitive and fearless in the face of certain danger. He closed his eyes, his face darkening until it assumed an otherworldly expression of absolute tranquility. Alex watched in fascination, sensing the presence of the Force as the Jedi concentrated the life-force energy about him. Through his talents, it became a tangible essence -- an extension of his mind, reaching out in summons to the presence beyond them in the shadows.

There was a low shuffling in the underbrush that grew steadily louder, breaking the Jedi's concentration. Before Alex could react to the noise, a boetay puppy came bounding from the shadows. Barely three weeks old, the animal's hide was a dark fawn, broken at regular intervals by black stripes that ran the length of its neck, back, and quarters. With uncharacteristic playfulness, the pup loped through the dried underbrush, its stunted legs hindered by the deep compost of gnarled branches and fallen leaves. Without hesitation, it trotted up to Brandl and balled itself in his hands as he picked it up, cradling the puppy in his arms. "A boetay?" He tried to hand the creature to Alex.

"Didn't you hear me right? That little one's mother has got to be close by. If she even suspects that you--"

"Look behind you, Alex." There was a sinister tone to Brandl's voice. His statement was a command, not a request. "Look."

Glaring at him, Alex slowly obeyed, glancing cautiously over her shoulder. She stifled a scream as the shadow of the adult boetay crossed her line of vision. It was a scant half-meter away. The animal panted passively at the sight of her, ignoring the scent of fear emanating from the human girl. With uncommon complacency, the boetay sank down on its haunches and then laid down at her feet, as if waiting until the pleasantries of the unexpected introduction were over.

"You see," Brandl whispered, leaning over her shoulder. "There's nothing to be afraid of, Alex. Here," he stroked the puppy one last time and then tucked the creature into Alex's arms.

Alex could not resist the temptation to stroke the boetay's head, feeling the soft fur beneath her fingers. The puppy nibbled gently at her hand, charming her into a playful game of pinch and nip. She swallowed pensively, bending at the waist as she lowered the puppy to its mother. In a bold stroke, she reached out to the adult boetay. "Don't be afraid," she heard Brandl whisper behind her. Petting the creature's face with her fingers, she drew back in awe. She watched, as if staring through the illusionary side of a mirror, as the boetay retrieved its pup in its massive jaws and loped away, back to the shadowy sanctuary of the woods.

Alex exhaled, trembling visibly as the emotion of the moment swept through her. Turning to Brandl, she met his smiling face with incredulous wonder. "How... how did you--"

The static crackle of a comlink interrupted her. "Lord Brandl, contact-code red. Respond."

Quickly pulling the comlink to his lips, Brandl's face hardened in the glow of the moonlight. "Report!"

"There's been an explosion across from Imperial Headquarters. Structural compromise. Collateral damage. The works." Lieutenant Werth's voice transmitted his calm across the signal, lending a semblance of control to an otherwise chaotic circumstance.

"My father!" Alex shouted.

"The Governor?"

"He wasn't anywhere near the blast. We were in the headquarters building. You better get down here. It's quite a scene. Werth out."

There was a familiarity in Werth's tone that raised Alex's suspicions. But concern for her father outweighed any misgivings she had about the Jedi and his military aide. As Brandl took her by the arm, she hurried up the winding trail to the patio. There were no words between them as they ran to the landspeeder, which was parked under the mansion's front portico.

Brandl slid over the closed door and into the passenger seat, as Alex threw herself behind the steering bar, ignoring the tight pull of her gown. Throwing the speeder into gear, she jammed the accelerator and guided the craft back onto the main road leading to Ariana.

Nearly a kilometer away from the city, the deafening sounds of security sirens could be heard above the speeder's laboring engines. Alex swerved through the abandoned checkpoint and braked sharply as Lieutenant Werth walked out of the commotion of emergency medical vehicles and rescue equipment to meet them.

Glancing at Alex, Werth pursed his lips as if reconsidering what he was going to say. But as Brandl's sharp gaze fell over him, the officer straightened, ignoring Alex as if she were not there.

"It was a thermal detonator." Behind him, the rescue crews struggled to pull another body from the rubble of Chado's Pub. The entire front of the building had collapsed in the blast. Smoke and flames still rose from the expired explosion as a pair of droids sprayed the area with flame-retardant foam. Blown some eighty meters from the blast radius, glass and debris littered the thoroughfare and the steps of the Imperial Headquarters building across the street.

"Where is Governor Winger?" Brandl asked, motioning for a detachment of stormtroopers to join him at the site.

"We were in his office at the time of the explosion. He should be on his way now to inspect the damage himself," Werth replied. The Imperial turned to Alex, sensing her unspoken question. "He's a bit shaken, but fine."

Alex frantically scanned the crowd, looking for any sign of her friends as two emergency vehicles pulled away from the scene. Hearing the report on her father, she turned to Brandl and saw the relief that swept across his face. "Lieutenant Werth, do you know who was hurt? Who have they taken to the medical center?"

"No names as yet, Miss Winger. I'm sure the extraction team will--"

"Alex!"

Alex recognized the voice immediately. "Dair! Thank the stars you're all right." She ran up to the Imperial and wrapped her arms around him. "How did you get out of there alive?"

Dusted with glass particles from the explosion, Dair brushed at the sleeves of his uniform. "I left about a minute before the blast. Nilo and I were standing in front of HQ when the whole thing went up." He stared at the rubble of the pub and shook his head incredulously.

"I want the entire area sealed off! Now! No questions!" Brandl raged. "Sergeant, I want the city boundaries blockaded immediately. No one in. No one out. Every transport is to be searched, top to bottom. You have your orders! Move out!"

While Brandl was preoccupied, Alex turned to Dair, shielding her face in the dimness. "The underground?"

Carefully checking to see who was watching, Dair exhaled with effort, avoiding her eyes. He shook his head in a subtle acknowledgment to her question about their shared friends in the resistance movement. Chado's Pub was more than just a popular meeting place for Imperials and citizen patrons. It was a successful front for the Garosian resistance, from which the movement derived much of its intelligence information and tactical reports.

Alex stared at the twenty or so body bags lining the buckled sidewalk beside the destroyed pub. "Who would have authorized this, Dair?"

"I don't have those answers, Alex," he whispered, watching as a detachment of stormtroopers escorted Governor Winger to the site of the blast. "Just watch your back. Lord Brandl may not be all he appears to be."

"What?"

"Lieutenant Haslip," Werth called. "A word with you please."

Alex felt another chill as that familiar, sinister undertone appeared in Werth's voice. She lingered at Dair's shoulders, releasing him only after a brief, silent dialogue between their eyes. "Just watch your back, Alex," he whispered again.

She watched him for a moment, straining to hear the conversation above the sound of crackling flames and nearby comlinks. "No," she heard Dair saying, "I don't remember seeing any suspicious characters. The pub was packed with regulars, a typical evening..."

"Damnable Rebels!" Governor Winger snarled. Seeing his daughter, he cried out, "Alexandra!" As he quickened his pace toward Alex, the eleven stormtroopers about him hastened their strides to keep pace. The governor swept her into his arms. "Are you all right, my dear?"

"Fine, now that I can see you for myself." She brushed a stray hair from his face, staying close to his warmth. "I was with Lord Brandl." As she spoke his name, Alex turned to see the Jedi crossing the street toward them. His shoulders were broad and tense with rage as the full burden of his authority bore down upon him.

"I don't care whose transport it is," he snarled at the subordinate scurrying at his heels. "Nothing comes before the Governor's safety or his daughter's. Is that clear? I want that skiff ready within the hour." Halting suddenly, he whirled on the officer. "Your failure will be met with the swiftest justice... my justice. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Lord Brandl." Turning from the Jedi, the officer motioned some men to assist him. Nearby, Alex saw Lieutenant Werth watching, a smirk of satisfaction etched across his face. Noticing that she was staring at him, he quickly turned back to the business of questioning Dair.

"Was it the resistance, Lord Brandl?" Winger questioned eagerly.

Brandl's face was dark with emotion, hidden intentions moving across his eyes as he raised his gaze from the scorched ground to meet the governor's eyes. "No doubt in my mind."

Liar! Alex shouted within her mind. She could sense the lie, clear and above her own knowledge about Chado's Pub and its connections to Garos's underground freedom fighters.

"Given the nature of this random attack, so close to Imperial Headquarters, I must insist that you and your daughter accompany me to a safehouse, Governor Winger. My superiors briefed me about this Garosian resistance movement. I never assumed they'd attempt such a bold tactic against us."

Winger shook his head to protest. "I don't think that's necessary--"

"Governor, this isn't some fringe group of radicals we're talking about here." Brandl straightened his towering frame, staring down at Winger. "These people are well-armed, and very likely connected with the New Republic. They will stop at nothing to achieve their goals. Your safety and the safety of your daughter are in my hands. Now please, allow me to do my duty to you," he nodded to Alex, "and to her." The Jedi waved a dismissive hand before him to ward off Alex's objections. "It will only be for a few hours until our transport is readied. You have my word on it."

"Very well, Lord Brandl," Winger relented. "At least allows us the chance to gather some things from the mansion before going."

"Of course," Brandl bowed in response. "Lieutenant Werth. You will accompany us to the mansion."

Werth nodded in acknowledgment. "You're free to go," he whispered to Dair, allowing him to move away from the scene. Alex looked up as Dair crossed the street. There was a look of serious concern in his face, concern for her, concern for her father. But there was little Alex could do and she knew that, staring at the rigid tenacity in her father's face. He had decided. Now Lord Brandl was in control.

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Transformed into a temporary refuge, the abandoned Imperial listening post was built deep into the mountainous countryside southeast of Ariana. Nearly three-stories tall, the bunker was well hidden in the remote forests of Garos IV. Stripped of intelligence equipment and support personnel, the purported safehouse offered few amenities. Alex glared from one corner of the room to the next. The small garrison reminded her of a prison cell or interrogation center. The only furniture was a fairly uncomfortable-looking sofa and a conference table with four chairs that she recognized as standard issue -- obviously confiscated from Imperial Headquarters.

The only window in the room opened onto an observation deck from where she could see one of the five Imperial scout troopers sent to protect them. From the extended platform and deck, the inner walls of the underground garrison sloped down into the mountain and outward to form the interior walls of a small hangar bay. There was little light, as the base was still under minimal power. The fragmented carvings of illumination reflected in the trooper's armor were from an outside source, a nearby lamp or moonlight filtering through the bay doors.

Pacing around the confines of the small room, Alex felt like a caged animal. The unseen prison which held her boasted no doors, no bars, no chains to bind her -- which served only to heighten her agitation. The barrier was her loyalty and devotion to her father. He stood by the observation glass and watched her with growing impatience. Rubbing his hand across his brow, Winger scowled at her in an uncharacteristic show of emotion. "Would you please stop that, Alexandra," he insisted. "What has gotten into you? I don't think I've ever seen you so distraught."

Alex balled her hands into clenched fists, hearing the knuckles pop under the tension. "I just feel so--" she shook her head, searching for the words to describe her predicament. "So out of touch with what's happening here." She stopped pacing and grabbed the edges of the table in frustration. "I feel like a prisoner!"

"It's only for a short while. Lord Brandl assured me it would be no more than an hour or two at best. And after that bombing in the city, we're safer here, under his care, until we move off-world."

I'm not leaving Garos! She took a deep breath to calm herself. There was no way she was leaving Garos. If it meant admitting her allegiance to the New Republic, somehow she hoped her father would understand. "Father, we don't know that the resistance planted those detonators at the pub."

"Who else would be responsible, Alexandra? Who else would have access to military-grade explosives?"

Peering out from the observation platform and into the darkened hangar below, Alex wondered where Brandl was and what he knew about the explosion. "The resistance wouldn't do it, Father. I know they wouldn't do it. There was no purpose for it." She turned to her father, noticing the deep lines in his face. The stress of dealing with the resistance movement and the impending invasion had aged him over the last few days.

Winger stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"The Garosian resistance does not kill innocents. Not even Imperial innocents. They only target supply convoys, armory stations, military targets" Alex swallowed the lump in the back of her throat and turned away from him. "I know," she whispered, "I led many of those missions myself."

"You're one of them?"

Alex nodded, chewing nervously at her lower lip. "For over five years now."

"Five years?" Winger shook his head in faltering disbelief. A pained expression flushed through his eyes as they drew a rim of tears. "My own daughter?"

Walking up to him, Alex met his agonizing gaze. She took his hands into hers, bringing them close to her heart. "I love you, Father. Please don't ever doubt that. You were always good to me, gave me your love, your respect. No daughter could ever ask for more."

"Then why..." His voice trailed off as the defiant glare of an Imperial official hardened across his face. He took his hands from her, appalled by her confession. "I loved you as if you were my own flesh and blood. Alexandra, I trusted you! Five years... years," he said, a trace of anger in his voice. "I trusted you! Stars above! What am I supposed to think now?"

Before Alex could respond, Winger silenced her with a dismissive gesture. The anguish in his heart was so evident that it translated into the stiff posture of his shoulders and neck. "I remember, when you were a little girl, you always said you wanted to fly a starfighter. Of course, I thought you meant a TIE fighter." His eyes

narrowed suspiciously, as if he now questioned the reality of those memories. "All those years you talked of attending the Academy."

"All I ever wanted was to fight against the Empire's injustices, Father."

"The Empire I serve."

"The Empire that forced you to serve." Alex threw up her hands, sitting down at the conference table. "The Empire that killed my grandparents and thousands of other innocent people on my homeworld."

"I was told that the Rebels destroyed Janara III, murdered their own people to keep their secrets safe from us."

"The Empire lied to you, Father. They lie to everyone!"

Bowing his head in sorrow, Winger struggled to come to grips with the realization. "When you came to Garos, you brought Sall and me more happiness than we had ever known." He shook his head, still struggling with his daughter's revelation.

"Father, the Imperials lied to you!" Alex said, her voice sounding harsh in her ears. "You never questioned them because you didn't want to know the truth."

"Perhaps I couldn't face the truth. I wasn't ready. Not then, not now. Not for this." Winger took a deep, shuddering breath. "I've worked most of my life to bring peace to Garos. Civil war was tearing this world apart, literally."

"And you achieved it," Alex sighed. "Through Imperial might." She stared into the observation shield, attempting to lose her emotions in the reflection of the glass. A movement below in the hangar caught her eye as a shadow moved across the bay floor. Momentarily, the scout trooper jumped to attention and saluted.

"I'm not leaving Garos, Father." Alex stood up and stepped out onto the observation platform above the docking bay. As she scanned the darkness, she saw a shadowy form lurking in the docking bay. Tripped by a motion sensor, a solitary utility light illuminated the slim form of Jaalib Brandl. He stared up at her and then turned to exit through the hangar door.

She turned back to her father. "You've always done what you felt was right for Garos. I can only hope that you will understand." She met his eyes with firm resolve, feeling his pain. "Maybe you'll decide that it's not too late to change sides." She walked across the room and opened the door.

"Where are you going?" Winger probed.

Alex felt a smile as the concern in his voice resurfaced above the anger at her betrayal. "I think we both could use some time to think about this. I'm going to get some fresh air."

She slipped outside into the warmth of the Garosian night. Descending the blast-cut stairwell, she hurried to the ground level of the bunker. There were two scout troopers on duty at the entrance to the hangar bay doors. Before she could question them, she sensed Brandl's presence. Turning instinctively toward the only trail leading into the bunker and its hangar bay, Alex saw Brandl on the far side of the compound. A dark figure bathed in shadows, he was astride a speeder bike, his cape billowing in the breeze. He seemed to be waiting for her. Revving the bike's engines, he took off down the narrow, winding road.

"Where's he going?" Alex asked one of the scout troopers.

"We discovered some unusual sensor readings, Miss Winger," the squad leader replied. "Lord Brandl wanted to investigate them personally."

Why not send a pair of troopers to check the disturbance? What could be so sensitive that Brandl would opt to venture out into the forest himself? A nagging suspicion tugged at the back of her mind as the darkness enticed her to follow. There was a seldom-used resistance camp nearby. What if her friends in the freedom movement had tracked them here? Had their presence been detected?

Alex sprinted toward the remaining speeder bike. "Miss Winger!" she heard the scout trooper call. "Miss Winger, Lord Brandl left direct orders not to allow you to--" His voice was drowned out in the roaring thunder of the bike's repulsor engines as Alex hit the accelerator and took off after Brandl.

The twin moons created the dim illusion of late dusk. Their combined light filtered down through the thick forest canopy, casting elongated shadows across the hazardous mountain trail. Alex carefully guided the speeder

bike, navigating hairpin turns with ease. Two kilometers from the safehouse, she slowed her bike and quickly scanned the darkness. Catching Brandl as he disappeared around a curve, she listened intently to the roar of the bike's engines. The whine slowly diminished, but not because of distance. He was slowing down, perhaps turning off the road to scout out the hillside.

The familiar whine of his vehicle continued to echo through the trees, but it was no longer moving. Brandl had stopped nearby and was revving the engines. *What is he up to?* she wondered.

She unconsciously ran her hand along the length of her arm. A chill raced up her spine as the burning sensation and the stench of charred flesh assailed her senses. *Watch your back*, Dair's words suddenly came back to her. *Lord Brandl may not be all he appears to be.*

There was something frightening about Brandl, frightening and yet fascinating. Since his arrival, there had been some peculiar happenings. The bombing at Chado's Pub was certainly not the work of Garos's freedom fighters. Recalling the incident, Brandl's face loomed in her memory. His expression was unreadable, as disconcerting as his interest in the pub when they had walked past it earlier that evening.

Studying the deep gloom of the forest, Alex felt her heart quicken. The shadows lengthened about her, defying the glare of Garos's twin moons. There was a profound silence that settled over the forest interior as if all the life in the immediate area was suddenly drained from the landscape.

She steered the speeder bike off the trail and headed into the trees toward the summit of a low plateau. Brandl stood at the edge of the precipice. His back was to the moonlit horizon as he faced her, watching her approach with interest. The wind rose abruptly, blowing through the shoulder-length darkness of his hair. The Force was with him, rumbling with a din of absolute hostility.

It was not the gentle vibration that Alex recalled from experience or her encounter with Skywalker. This was a malignant manifestation -- and Brandl stood at the root of it. Unwittingly reaching out with her limited senses, she recoiled in agony as the formidable presence of the dark side lashed at her. The icy pin-pricking of its phantom teeth gnawed at her skin.

My vision, Alex thought with dread. Her fingers slipped down to the side of the speeder bike, locating the blaster pistol at its fasteners. Keeping the weapon to the side in the shadows, she dismounted from the vehicle and started up the gentle slope to the summit. "It was you who arranged for the explosion at Chado's Pub, wasn't it?"

Dark laughter was the response. "It was me."

"You're here to eliminate the resistance. To what end? The New Republic is on its way. The Empire has no chance of recovering this world."

"Oh, my intentions are not so grand as that," Brandl whispered.

"Then what are your intentions?" Alex snapped. "In killing those Rebel freedom fighters, you killed Imperials. Innocent Imperials. Isn't there some rule against that?"

"I told you, Alexandra. I'm not here to hinder your Rebel movement or impede the New Republic. These are the least of my worries. I'm here to send a message to my own masters in the Empire." There was a spoiled, boyish quality about his voice. "I no longer want any part of them, their games, or their war."

"Then why not simply leave? Why kill innocent people?"

Brandl's shoulders swayed in the updraft from the lowlands, his robes billowing to the sides like the gigantic wings of some dark, predatory bird. "It's not as simple as you might think. The Empire has ways of re-educating those uninspired minds who would desert them. Particularly those of us with... valuable talents." He walked toward her a few strides and stopped as she tensed at his approach. "I needed to make my separation very clear to them, burning any and all bridges in my wake. There can be no return, no acceptance of this prodigal son."

"You're hoping to make a break with the Empire by destroying their enemies?"

"Oh, no." A malevolent smile creased his thin lips as his dark eyes focused on her and held her defiant gaze. "My plan to cement the breech between myself and my superiors begins and ends with the assassination of an Imperial Governor and his only daughter." The roguish grin deepened, becoming malevolent in the shadows. "Ironic, isn't it? That I should come to Garos with the charge of protecting the governor and his family, while harboring every intention of killing you and your father."

Alex felt the color drain from her face. She winced in pain as her chest tightened. "You brought me here to kill me?"

"No, I brought you here to spare your life." Brandl laughed easily. "I never imagined you could be so intriguing a young woman, Alexandra Winger. Never in my wildest dreams."

"And my father?"

"Oh, he's not nearly as intriguing as you are." He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the camp. "And in a few moments, he'll be quite dead."

As the Jedi's intentions sank in, Alex screamed through clenched teeth and brought up the blaster. Before she could depress the trigger, the weapon was ripped from her grasp. It flew through the night air, landing in the underbrush well beyond her reach. As Brandl laughed the forest came to life and swallowed the weapon whole into its depths.

Weaponless and in a rage, Alex sprang at Brandl, swinging wide with a punch. As the Jedi agilely dodged her, the abrupt hiss of a lightsaber broke the silence. The blade cut a wide swath in the darkness as it arced through the still air and slashed through Alex's jacket down to the skin. She cried out in pain, cradling her wounded arm.

"I don't know why you're so upset," Brandl taunted. "With Winger dead, you'll be free. Free to join your friends in the resistance."

Alex stared wide-eyed at him, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks.

He laughed at her startled reaction. "Did you think I didn't know? About you and your involvement with the resistance movement? It's the one reason you're still alive."

The presence of the dark side was so potent in him that it stifled Alex. "How could you possibly know?"

Brandl laughed again outright, his face assuming a boyish charm that easily concealed the darkness of his being. "Your thoughts and emotions are so easily read, Alexandra. I'm surprised Skywalker lets you walk around broadcasting." His eyes widened, mocking the astonishment in her eyes. "Yes, I do know about the great Master Skywalker and your peculiar affection for him."

Enraged by his insinuation, Alex hurried to her feet. "You don't know anything! About me *or* the resistance!"

"Oh, but I do know," he whispered with rehearsed sincerity. "I know about the lost little girl, scared and alone, buried beneath the burning rubble of her home -- orphaned and stranded on some distant, smothered world." Brandl's laughter echoed against the trees. "It reads like some commonplace tragedy I once wrote when I was a child." His apathy was chilling. "It's no wonder they found you."

"They?" Alex asked, narrowing her eyes.

"My father, Lord Adalric Cessius Brandl and the Imperial armada that destroyed Janara III. My father was one of the Emperor's High Inquisitors -- the Jedi executioners who were more ruthless observers of His Imperial Will. He must have been looking for you and others like you." Brandl sat down on a nearby stump. "A thousand or more lives to find one little girl and a handful of Jedi hopefuls."

He sniffed disdainfully, catching his breath as he chuckled. "He would surely laugh were he here with us now. He would. I know he would--"

The abrupt thunder of an explosion cut him off. Behind them, a blinding, white light flashed, momentarily displacing the night as flames and molten debris shot almost 100 meters into the air.

Brandl turned away from the blast and stared at Alex, studying her expression. With a sinister grin still etched across his handsome face, he whispered, "And here, some fifteen years later, history repeats itself."

"Father!" Wincing as the painful gash in her arm pinched and pulled at the tender skin, Alex bolted toward the speeder bikes. She was mounted and spinning the steering bar as the repulsor engines ignited, propelling her



back onto the forest path. She followed the dying embers of the blast and a trail of acrid smoke that poured from the site. Nearly a quarter of a kilometer from the bunker, trees were down, uprooted and flattened in the explosion. Alex gunned the speeder bike over the threshold of the blast radius. The underbrush was little more than cinders, kicked up in the wake of her passage.

Outside the listening post, the bodies of the scout troopers had been blown thirty meters from the base of the staircase. The scent of singed armor was sickening as Alex stopped the speeder bike and jumped off. She ran to what had been the entrance to the bunker.

The entire face of the mountain had collapsed in upon itself. With the fierce destructive force of the blast, it was impossible to imagine that anyone could have survived it. Brandl's motives for moving them here to this isolated place in the forest was a stroke of genius. They were completely cut off, isolated, and without support personnel. Nothing and no one would have prevented him from killing them and making good his escape.

Except for the crackle of a few remaining flames, silence pervaded the ruined area. Alex fought back tears, trembling as a sense of hopelessness overcame her. Her eyes darted from one destroyed section to the next, determined to either find a way to her father or provide him with a way out. Though she knew her efforts would eventually prove fruitless, she continued to scan the still-smoldering ruins. She couldn't allow herself to concede her father's death.

Then from the side she heard a soft scraping. Focusing her concentration, she listened as the sound intensified. It was coming from beneath the smoking rubble near the hangar bay. Channeling her senses toward the scratching, she perceived a faint glimmer of life buried beneath the rocks and mortar. "Father?" Her voice cracked as the presence sharpened and she recognized it. Lunging at the rubble, Alex began heaving rocks to the side and digging through the debris. She ignored the painful lacerations spreading across her hands and fingers, desperate to reach Winger, who was buried just beneath the collapsed wall of the entrance. Within moments, she uncovered one of his hands.

"Alexandra?" she heard the muffled anguish in his voice.

Renewing her efforts, she ignored her straining muscles and continued to free him from beneath the collapsed bunker wall. "Father, can you move?" she whispered, uncovering his torso, his arms, and then freeing his legs. Winger remained motionless and unresponsive.

Behind them, she heard the distinct whine of repulsor engines as Brandl returned to the ruined bunker. There was a gloated, sated expression in his face as he surveyed his handiwork.

Alex pulled her father against her, using her slight weight to drag him from his smoking tomb. As they moved out of the crater, there was a secondary explosion deep within the bunker. The blast caused a shifting of the surface debris as the bunker sank deeper into the mountain cavity, quickly burying Winger's feet in the ruins.

As the deafening tremor subsided, Alex stumbled beneath her father and dropped to her knees. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Brandl watching. "Help me," she said.

"That's not part of my plan," he replied with an arrogant smile. In this scene, the heroine's father must die."

"You cold-hearted--" Alex grit her teeth and pulled, finally freeing her father's body from the rubble. He was alive, barely. But without proper medical attention, Brandl's plans would be complete.

Beyond the blast wreckage stood a small storage barracks. It remained intact, despite the blast, half-hidden in an alcove of large boulders. Supporting her father's weight against her, Alex struggled to move him into the darkened shelter. She laid him in a temporary cot that must have been used by sentries between shifts. Activating the power source, she swore as the illumination grid flickered with sporadic dim snatches of light. Its backup generators, unattended in the absence of support personnel, were run down and inadequate. Within moments of turning it on, the unit shut off, allowing the darkness to return.

Seeing a glowrod in the far corner, Alex took it from the wall apparatus and activated it. Along with the glowrod, she took a first aid kit from a pile of discarded equipment boxes.



Unconscious beneath her, Tork Winger was oblivious to her attempts to salvage what remained of his life. His labored breathing grew more shallow by the minute as he began to succumb to his injuries.

"No!" Alex whispered, squeezing Winger's hands. "Father, you have to fight. Fight!" As Brandl's triumphant figure darkened the shelter doorway, she turned to him. "He's dying."

"As the script requires."

Alex stared at Brandl, measuring the defiance in his eyes. "Jaalib, please. You've already won. I'll tell the Empire how you betrayed them. How you nearly killed the governor. I'll tell the New Republic. You'll get your wish. Please." She felt the sting of tears. "Please help me."

Her pleas did not go unrewarded. Alex saw the hardened veneer of satisfaction crumble from his face, replaced by a thin mask of remorse. "You're not strong enough," he replied.

"Then I'll use the dark side of the Force if I have to!"

"Are you so eager to set your feet on that road, Alexandra?"

"Just tell me what to do."

"Do you know what you are asking?" Seeing the glaze of tears and the defiance in her eyes made the Jedi pause. "No, I don't think you do."

"You needn't worry your conscience about the consequences."

"Betrayal is the worst crime a Jedi can commit. Betrayal of a loved one, a friend, a mentor. Betrayal of self is an even greater crime." Brandl straightened his long frame, staring down at her from what Alex perceived as an impossible height. "The path to the dark side is different for all of us. I can't tell you how to get there. What leads you will be entirely different from the circumstances that led me. But one thing is certain... you've been there before. The path is an old and familiar one." Avoiding her eyes, he whispered, "Anger and fear will be your guides."

Betrayal. Alex stared at the dark Jedi, unsettled by his words. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath that rattled audibly in her lungs. She concentrated on her father's face, feeling the pain of his injuries as vividly as the cauterizing bite of the lightsaber. Without warning, her pain intensified. Internal hemorrhaging, broken bones, crushed organs. Alex collapsed to the dirt floor with a resounding thud. Wriggling in agony, she sought comfort, a release. Her skills with the Force were limited and undirected. Her attempt to control and define that power only sharpened the pain and prolonged the suffering, infuriating her.

Eyes wide in terror, she focused on the shadows in the far corner of the room. They beckoned to her, but she resisted the temptation, suddenly unsure of what was transpiring -- unsure of herself. Fear of failure heightened her torment, sealing off any chances of channeling the Force as Skywalker had taught her.

Do not resist. The shadows remained, inviting her into the darkness. Alex dropped her defenses and surrendered to it, allowing the dark side to work through her.

There was a sudden surge of energy as every cell in her body became impregnated with sentience and sensation. Bewilderment and fear gave way to wonder as her senses awakened to the seemingly endless force surrounding Garos. Cradled in that vast source of power, she believed she could drain the life of any creature, realign that energy, and direct it at will. She reveled in the sensation, allowing herself to become one with the complicated web of life. As her mind raced, she felt the untold secrets of the universe come within her grasp. She fought to keep her mind focused in the here and now, resisting the temptation to charge forward toward those unknown realms.

Laying her hands on her father's chest, she willed the energy into him. But as she stood in wonderment of her newly found ability, it began to slip away from her. Without the anger or fear, there was nothing left to prey on except her own fragile life-force.

She panicked as the dark side's influence drained her energy. It was a small price to pay for the life of her father; but now she was dying. As the corrupt surge continued to feed on her, the power to save herself evaded her.

The shadows converged on her and Alex sensed a presence. Among the ravenous phantoms, Brandl stood before her, his hand reaching toward her. She took strength from it, never hesitating to take it as the breath was forced from her lungs. She moved closer to the dark vision, but it was not Brandl's face she saw peering back at her from the veil of darkness.

Recognizing her own face in the black cowl, she tried to pull away. But the apparition held tightly onto her wrist with its fleshless hand. The other hand was moving toward her throat.

Alex recoiled in horror as she felt the scaling bones at her neck. As she struggled to free herself, the hand tightened, restricting the flow of air to her lungs. "Do not resist," it said to her. "Do not resist." Alex relaxed, and for a brief moment the tightness in her neck eased. But as she renewed her struggles, her muscles constricted on her again, cutting off the flow of air to her lungs.

Thrashing wildly as she tried to inhale, she lashed out against the apparition. Her hands clutched at her throat as she shook her consciousness free of the phantasm, only to find herself writhing on the storage shelter's dirt floor. Shivering beneath a light glaze of sweat, she sat up abruptly and stared at her father's face. His breathing was still shallow, but steady. As the sinister power of the dark side faded into her, she watched as his strength increased and his breathing came easier in the slow, even rhythm of peaceful sleep.

And where is your strength, Alex? She closed her eyes and shuddered at the echo of her demented inner voice. She felt violated, tricked. Quickly rising to her feet, she retreated from the shadows, trying to hide in the dim halo of the glowrod.

"Beware the brilliance of the light side," Brandl whispered, "for while it illuminates and warms, it casts a cold, blinding glare on those too humble to look beyond it to the shadows." The Jedi stepped toward her, offering his hand. "Dear, gentle Alexandra," he sighed sadly, "won't you come in from the cold?"

Trembling in the light, Alex stared at him. "What have I done?"

"The dark side has its price. You've had but a small taste of it." Caressing her face, he embraced her in an attempt to ward off the chill.

Though she heard his voice, she couldn't register the deep, shifting tones of it. She felt him, his warmth, but her senses were failing. The walls of the shelter and the fixtures began to blur and she felt her knees buckle beneath her weight. Brandl caught her before her body could hit the ground. Unable to resist, Alex laid her head against the Jedi and once again, she succumbed to the darkness.

* * *

Alex awoke to the mournful howl of a boetay. From across a distance, the desperate cry reverberated inside her head, compounding the pressure behind her eyes. Head aching, she opened her eyes and struggled to sit up. As her vision sharpened, she concentrated on the peculiar shadow sitting across from her. A few minutes later, Bane Werth's untroubled face appeared in the warm afterwash of a glowrod.

Dressed in a Corellian flight jacket and pants, he seemed more at ease in the garb of a smuggler than an Imperial uniform. His hair was damp and he brushed a lock of it from his face, staring at her with such tangible regret that Alex could feel his emotions, unveiled and distinct.

"Where's my father?" she asked, gripping the edge of the cot.

Werth rose from his chair and walked a few steps to the shelter entrance. "She's awake!" he shouted. Hesitating at the door, he glanced back at her with that peculiar remorse intensifying as he looked on her. Then without further comment, he pushed through the narrow opening to the outside.

As he left, Alex could hear the steady rhythm of the rain falling outside. Concerned about her father, she swung her legs over the edge of the cot and slowly rose to her feet. Governor Winger was lying in a temporary bunk mattress where she had left him. Kneeling beside him, Alex checked his vital signs and smiled as her efforts

registered an improvement in his condition. Despite her light touch, her father awoke to the gentle sensation of her fingers.

Opening his swollen eyes, Winger smiled, seeing her above him. "Alexandra," he whispered, panting with the effort. He trembled visibly as he raised his arm to caress her face. His smile deepened as he confirmed what his clouded senses reported. She was alive and well. Then quietly, he slipped back into a peaceful sleep.

With each passing moment, Alex could feel the strength returning to him. And in sensing that energy, she felt Brandl's power at work, cradling her father's life essence. Sitting down on the ground beside Winger, she turned to the apparition standing in the shelter doorway behind her. "Will you always be there, over my shoulders, watching me from the shadows?"

"When next you stare into the darkness, will it make you feel any safer knowing that I was there?" Brandl remained in the doorway, making no effort to come farther into the light. "If this is your request, good lady, as your most gentle knight, I will always be where you most need me." Alex heard the, muffled voice of his sincerity. "The New Republic forces have arrived," he said. "I took the liberty of alerting them of your status. They should be here in a few minutes."

"The invasion?" Alex asked, wondering at the tide of the battle.

"The New Republic is winning, even as we speak. You and your fellow resistance members are to be congratulated. Garos IV is free." Raising his chin with cool arrogance, Brandl stared down at her. "I can arrange for your father's safe return to the Empire. He would be well guarded--"

"Well guarded!" Alex spat. "By you?" She shook her head with firm determination. "My father's allegiance is to Garos, Lord Brandl. Not to the Empire or the New Republic. I'll make whatever arrangements are necessary to honor his wishes."

"They're here." Werth's voice drifted in from the darkness. "It's time to go."

Avoiding Brandl's piercing gaze, Alex sat up on her knees. She pulled the blankets against her father's neck, holding his hand as he slept. Wishing the Jedi to stay, she whispered, "I don't know if I should thank or curse you."

"You'll decide which in time." The Jedi tossed a dark object across the shelter to her.

Alex saw the strange figurine fall into the blankets. Retrieving the sculpted Jj'abot piece, she regarded the black knight, reminded of the play. "What will become of you?" she spoke the remembered lines. "Where will you go?"

"I shall become as the shadows, my lady," he replied. "And I shall go where only the darkness reigns." Brandl smiled, bowing his head to her. It was a thin, melancholy expression that touched Alex with its sincerity. "Good-bye, Alex."

At the sound of incoming search crews, Brandl stepped outside into the night, as if on cue, where he vanished into the shadows. Alex listened to the hollow cadence of the rain against the rooftop. Tightening her grip on her father's hand and on the pawn, she laid her head against the warmth of the blanket and waited until the light of New Republic ships and ground forces diffused the darkness.